

Bitter Room – Root of Assumption:

Two weeks ago I suggested a New Years' resolution that would be worth your time making and keeping. Does anyone remember what that was? To Forgive!!

If you missed that sermon you can listen to it or read online at the church's website.

I ended that sermon with a passage out of the book of Hebrews and I'd like to take a closer look at that passage this morning. The passage says:

Hebrews 12:14-17 (NIV) *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. 16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. 17 Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.*

The point I made from that passage was that a “bitter root” could be unforgiveness in your life. And if you have that root of unforgiveness in your life it has a strong likelihood to destroy you from the inside out. Unforgiveness has the power to consume you with ongoing thoughts of how wrongly you've been treated and how much the other person deserves to suffer and it can easily consume you and take your thoughts off of God and onto your situation.

Another bitter root that the writer of Hebrews mentions is being sexually immoral and then he mentions this somewhat odd reference to Esau selling his inheritance rights for a single meal. And as I read that I found myself somewhat puzzled by what he meant by that reference. So, I dug a bit deeper and I'd like to share what I found with you this morning, because I believe that it may be quite helpful for all of us here.

To discover the original meaning we need to turn back into the Old Testament where this passage is quoted from. So, please turn in your Bibles this morning to the book of **Deuteronomy 29**. As you're turning there I'm going to set the stage for what we're about to read. The historical context for this passage is that the Israelites are preparing to enter the Promised Land – for the second time. They were here once before, 40 years earlier, but because of their lack of faith in God, they ended up wandering in the wilderness for the past 40 years. But now, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, this new generation of Israelites is receiving instructions from Moses.

Deuteronomy 29:16-18 (NIV) *You yourselves know how we lived in Egypt and how we passed through the countries on the way here. 17 You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold. 18 Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.*

Moses is warning against the practice of idolatry, worshipping other gods. The practice of idolatry would be the outward bitter poison that's produced by a bitter root (a person's heart that you cannot see). I think we can probably all get that. But there's more to it than that. For in the next several verses he mentions a second bitter root that shows up in a bitter fruit.

Deuteronomy 29:19-21 (NIV) *When such a person hears the words of this oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way,” they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. 20 The Lord will never be willing to forgive them; his wrath and zeal will burn against them. All the curses written in this book will fall on them, and the*

Lord will blot out their names from under heaven. 21 The Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law.

Wow, that's some tough talk. Notice who God's judgments are directed against. Individuals who gladly accept God's many blessings upon themselves – but figure that I'll accept God's blessings but then I'll go on living my life the same way I've always lived it. They persist on doing life “*my own way*.” This individual figures, there's really no downside to accepting God's blessings, I just won't agree to His conditions, that I need to spend my life living according to His desires rather than my own. Wow, that sounds very similar to our society today. People who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but then their lifestyles don't really change a whole lot. They treat salvation as more of an insurance policy against hell. And figure that as long as I've accepted Jesus Christ then God's obligated to accept me into heaven.

So, with that background, let's go back to our text in Hebrews 12 and reexamine the reference to Esau.

Hebrews 12:14-17 (NIV) *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. 16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. 17 Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.*

Do you remember the story of Esau? It's as good as any soap opera on TV today. Esau, the oldest brother, was a hunter and one day he came in starving from the fields and his younger brother was cooking some delicious smelling lentils. Jacob said that he'd give him a bowl of lentils in exchange for his firstborn birthrights. And Esau was so hungry that he went and sold his inheritance rights to his twin brother, Jacob, for a bowl of lentils and some bread. This entitled Jacob to receive all the inheritance rights that came with being the eldest. It was no doubt the worst decision of Esau's life – and it was irreversible. This is what the author compares to the bitter root being allowed to grow up in us. It's being willing to give up your inheritance rights down the road for immediate gratification right now.

In order to see the opposite of this you merely have to turn back to Hebrews 11. There the author lists all of these great men and women of faith from the Old Testament who went through really difficult times in their lives. But what kept them strong going through it all is that they kept their sights on God and the rewards for his faithful followers that was awaiting them after this life.

Hebrews 11:16 (NIV) *Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

And right after that Hall of Fame of the Faithful it says to us to use them as inspiration and keep setting our sights on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (**Heb. 12:1-3**). And as we keep our sights set on Jesus, it gives the proper perspective, strength and encouragement to keep on going - even when things get tough in this life.

So, let me ask you – what tempts you to take your focus off of God and onto the things of this world? It could be the hurt and pain you've experienced in this life and that's led you down a path of unforgiveness. Or, it could be the quick sexual encounter, or it could be gazing at pornography on your computer, or it could be your career that has become all consuming and subtly replaces your gazing at Jesus and loving Jesus and enjoying Jesus. What's the allure in your life that recasts your attention onto something other than Jesus?

In Sunday School we're going through a series entitled, **Goliath Must Fall**. And in it, Louie Giglio points out that in the story of David and Goliath, every single Israelite fighter and king Saul were gripped by fear of the giant Goliath. It wasn't until young David came along that someone was brave enough to confront this giant. But the key wasn't the bravery of David or his excellent fighting skills. The key was that David was so focused on God that Goliath wasn't much of a threat. David's heart focused on God allowed him to be victorious. Throughout the study, we'll be exploring other areas of our lives that often distract us and can consume us as well. Areas such as fear, rejection, comfort, anger and various addictions. And I'm confident that Louie could have written a much larger book on all the other things that tend to distract us from keeping our hearts and minds centered on Jesus.

Now this isn't the first time that the writer of Hebrews stresses the importance of keeping our focus on Jesus as we live out our lives daily.

Hebrews 2:1 (NIV) *We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*

Hebrews 3:12-14 (NIV) *See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*

Hebrews 4:1 (NIV) *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

Hebrews 6:4-6 (NIV) *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

Hebrews 10:26-27 (NIV) *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*

Remember that this letter was written to Christians. The author is clearly quite concerned that many of us take our focus off of Christ and on to all sorts of distractions that Satan puts in our path. Because as long as he can get our minds and hearts focused on anything, other than Christ, he's got us going down a path that he's quite comfortable with us going down. It could be sins or attitudes or it could be even keeping us so busy with religious activities that we take our focus off of Christ and onto those things.

I want to close this sermon by examining the verses that the author carefully penned after this warning about the bitter root springing up in our lives. I believe it's a passage intended to refocus our minds attention and our hearts affection on Jesus by painting a beautiful picture of the power and majesty of the Jesus we worship and serve.

Hebrews 12:18-21 – this is the picture and experience of the Israelites when God gave them the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. They were camped at the foot of the mountain and God descended in fire and the earthquakes and lighting and trumpet blast from heaven. He had previously warned Moses not to let anyone get too near to the mountain or His wrath would strike out and kill them. This was a terrifying picture of God and they didn't want to get close to this mountain. This is not the relationship we currently have with God.

Hebrews 12:22-24 This is who we've come to. The God of Mount Zion. The God of the new covenant where we have forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with God because our sins have been dealt with. God hasn't changed from the Old to the New Testament but because of our forgiveness of sins, through Jesus' death on the cross, we can come into His presence instead of being kept at a distance. That's the image and hope that the Old Testament saints kept focusing on during all the difficulties in their lives. It's this vision that motivated them to say no to all the distractions this world has to offer. And it's this vision of Jesus and our eternal dwelling place that's designed to keep us continually drawing closer and closer to God every day.

God doesn't want to threaten or scare you into a closer relationship with Himself. Now that you and my sins have been taken care of, He wants to draw you with His love and beauty and power and the promise of what awaits you one day in His very presence. And that's the greatest antidote to a life of complacency or sin – to be constantly amazed with the kindness and the glory and the love and the empowering grace of Almighty God. It's the best way to combat unforgiveness and bitterness and sexual immorality and a prideful spirit and greed and selfishness and the list can go on and on. Focus on Christ and draw constantly nearer and nearer to Christ. Do whatever it takes to fill your minds and hearts with Christ and what he's done for us and who He is and as a popular hymn says: "*and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.*"

John Piper said: *"Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It's a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the Gospel."*